

Intellectual disability and communication

Intellectual disability is when you have difficulty with learning and thinking.

Usually, you are born with intellectual disability. Sometimes it is caused by a childhood illness or injury.

You can't tell whether someone has intellectual disability by looking at them.

Around 450,000 people in Australia have an intellectual disability.

About intellectual disability

Sometimes, people use categories to describe the severity of intellectual disability. These categories include mild, moderate and severe. Severity descriptions relate to how well you do on a test that measures how smart you are (IQ test).

But anyone with intellectual disability can have trouble communicating, no matter how they perform in IQ tests.

Every person with intellectual disability is different. Everyone has different strengths and areas where you might need help.

Intellectual disability can mean you have trouble with:

- talking and expressing yourself
- making plans
- daily activities
- getting on with other people
- working in a job
- talking to a doctor or other health professional.

Communication

People with intellectual disability communicate in different ways. Some people use their voice to speak, but others may use hand signals, pictures or other tools to help them communicate without speaking. This is called augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).

Many people with intellectual disability use a mix of different communication methods, which is called multimodal communication.

The most important thing when talking with someone with intellectual disability is to understand and respect their unique way of communicating.

Intellectual disability can affect communication in different ways for different people. Some people might have a hard time communicating beyond their basic needs.

Here are some examples of communication difficulties that you might face if you have intellectual disability:

- Reading – this means being able to understand words and sentences when you read them.
- Writing – this is being able to put your thoughts and ideas into written words, while also using correct spelling and grammar.
- Speaking – this is using your voice to talk and being able to say words clearly, even if they are long or hard to say.
- Understanding – this is being able to learn and understand new things, as well as following instructions.
- Expression – this is being able to tell others what you want or need, as well as sharing your thoughts and ideas.
- Social communication – this means being able to talk to others in a way that makes sense, like taking turns in conversation and knowing what to say in different situations.
- Engagement – this means some people might communicate in ways that are different from what we are used to, and some might not seem to be communicating at all.

Some people with intellectual disability have trouble communicating with words. They may use other actions or behaviours to show how they feel. But sometimes, these behaviours can be dangerous and cause harm to themselves or others.

It's important to find new ways for them to communicate without hurting anyone. A speech therapist can help them find safer ways to express themselves.

How communication difficulties affect your life

When you have trouble communicating, it can mean you're not able to do things by yourself. It might be hard to:

- make choices
- ask for help
- express your opinions
- tell stories about yourself and others
- talk about a health problem
- find out about things.

Some people with intellectual disability might need extra help to develop relationships, work and live independently.

Relationships

If you have trouble communicating, it can make it hard to socialise and spend time with other people.

Children with intellectual disability have fewer friends than other children.

For adults, intellectual disability can lead to loneliness and isolation.

Employment

Some people with intellectual disability might have trouble talking to teachers, bosses or people they don't know.

This can make it hard to study or get a job.

Many employers don't know how to support people with communication difficulties at work.

Living independently

Some people with intellectual disability might have trouble living by themselves.

They might not be able to make their own choices.

They might have trouble talking to others about what they need.

Strategies to help communication

Each person with intellectual disability communicates in specific ways.

The best way to communicate with them is to understand the methods they use to get their message across, and work with them using their unique system.

This might involve using a communication book, an about me page, a communication passport, or a small card with tips for communication partners.

In general, you should:

- give the person plenty of time to form their message and to understand what you're saying
- ask them to repeat themselves if you don't understand them
- ask them politely to use a different way to get their message across (for example, drawing or showing you something)
- use visuals and gestures
- make sure they have understood you
- talk to them often so you get used to communicating with each other.

People with intellectual disability might have trouble paying attention or concentrating on communication.

You should consider how the environment might affect the person's ability to communicate. Minimise distractions if you can. Noisy and unfamiliar places can also make it hard to communicate.

How speech pathologists help

Speech pathologists work with children and adults with intellectual disability to help them communicate better.

Speech pathologists can also teach others, like support workers, family members, teachers, and community members, to communicate with a person with intellectual disability.

They can:

- work with the person with intellectual disability by assessing their communication skills and setting goals to improve them
- use different methods of communication like speaking, writing, and sign language to help people with intellectual disability express themselves and participate in daily activities
- educate people with intellectual disability and their communication partners about communication rights and strategies to communicate effectively and independently
- help people with intellectual disability match to a communication aid that suits them and assist them in getting access to it.

Find out more

The Council for Intellectual Disability website <https://cid.org.au/> has more information on how to include people with intellectual disability.

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